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ABSTRACT

Noting the difficulties communication departments have in providing students with television production opportunities, this paper proposes the use of cable television public access channels as a means of overcoming those difficulties. After defining and differentiating between local origination and public access programing, the paper discusses the symbiotic relationship between the local access channel and the college student learning television production, emphasizing the benefits to each party. It next examines the efforts of four colleges that have successfully used cable programing and details the degree of involvement and the different needs of each. In conclusion, the paper explores several issues departments should consider in using a cable outlet for student production and offers evidence of the interest of cable television companies in using student productions. (FL)

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Public Access Cable Television:
Extending the Production Laboratory for College Students

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Introduction

Providing a college student with television production opportunities is primarily a problem of economics: at most colleges and universities in the 1980's, the demand for studio time and equipment generally exceeds the supply. Students wishing to learn electronic field production so they might become better prepared for the competitive job market are channeled instead into studio courses due to portapak shortages in communications departments. Students wanting to learn videotape editing wait in long lines to get a turn at one of only a few editing machines. Professors strive to stagger assignments, provide a fair circulation policy on video equipment, and cope with the inevitable breakdowns and lengthy repairs that seem to "come with the territory" of television instruction. Equipment is expensive and sensitive, and few colleges have budgets that will permit the almost unlimited spending necessary to provide each student with his or her own camera, VCR, and editing station.

The picture is not entirely bleak, however, and

despair need not be the order of the day--or of the future. Cable television can provide some of the answers to the problem as surely as it now brings us HBO, Ted Turner's superstation, and reruns of Leave It to Beaver. This paper will discuss one component of cable television, public access, and look at that component as a potential means of opening up new opportunities for college students to become involved in television production outside of the traditional college classroom and studio environment.

This paper approaches the subject in four parts. First, some definitions are in order to explain key differences between such terms as local origination and public access. The second part of the paper discusses the symbiotic relationship between the local access channel and the college student learning television production, with emphasis on the mutual benefits of their interaction. Case studies of four colleges successfully involved in cable programming are outlined in Part Three, each with a different degree of involvement and a different set of needs. The conclusion of the paper explores some issues to consider with the use of a cable outlet for student productions, and offers evidence of the interest of cable TV in student video productions.

Definitions

Cable television, regardless of its shift in stature

from the 1950's to the 1980's, is nothing more or less than a method of receiving video information through wires rather than over the air.[1] Those wires bring into the homes of subscribers the three commercial television networks, various broadcast superstations that have desired to go "national," special news, sports, and entertainment programming, and the extra-cost optional movie channels such as HBO, Showtime, Cinemax, The Disney Channel, etc.

Local origination programming, or l.o., is any type of programming created by a local cable system as opposed to that retransmitted from satellite services.[2] Content of such local programming was generally restricted at first to local weather conditions, then to local news or bulletin board-type announcements, and finally to city council meetings, sports events, talk shows, local concerts, etc.

Public access came about following a ruling by the FCC in October of 1969 that required all cable TV systems with 3500 or more subscribers to begin local origination by April, 1970. The purpose of the ruling was to get cable operators to become less dependent upon retransmission of network shows and to more fully serve their communities through local programs.

Few cable TV operators complied, and the FCC backed down from its position, deciding instead in 1971 to require only that the systems make equipment and time accessible to those wishing to use it to produce programs.

The distinction, then, between local origination and public access television is one of program control and responsibility. L.O. is produced by people who work for the cable system; that system will control the content of the program. With access, the program is produced by members of the community, in conjunction with the cable system and in accordance with the franchise agreement. Access programming content is determined not by the cable system but by the community members.

Benefits of Working with Public Access

There are several benefits to working with public access cable programming. Earl Hines, area manager for Telecommunications, Inc., the largest MSO (multi-system operator) in the United States, welcomes local programming produced by college students in his Carrollton, Georgia, franchise area.[3] Such programming helps fill the void in the area of local news, sports, and public affairs on his channel 13, which generally carries the USA Network. The quality, if not quantity, of programs produced by college students for similar access channels across the nation is usually higher than that produced by completely inexperienced persons from the community with no background whatsoever in television production. The TV student from the local college, motivated and trained in basic studio and field production techniques, can go a long way in helping dispel the

common perception of access television so well described by Gross:

> . . . most access programs are produced with admirable intent and contain worthwhile content. Often they are amateurish in production values because the people producing them are novices, but even that is improving because cable companies are conducting workshops to teach citizens the rudiments of TV production.[4]

When local college students become involved in access programming, those workshops are the classrooms and the teaching is done by broadcast educators. The cable access station is the beneficiary of both the programming and the technical abilities of the producers.

Another benefit to the station is in the manpower that a local college or university can provide. No matter how small the access channel, if it is doing regular, on-going programs by, for, and about the community, that operation needs people to function. College students, earning credit for a practicum experience or internship, are a good source of cheap labor. They are, in fact, unpaid labor, willing and able to hang around the station during the day and after classes, doing jobs both menial and prestigious. At Community Cable 8 in DeKalb, Illinois, students from Northern Illinois University prepared and taped the nightly schedule board, a preview of the evening's programs.[5] They also swept floors, answered telephones, went out on location shoots, rigged lighting, and performed the essential studio functions during scheduled tapings. They became a

valuable resource in an operation with a paid staff of two and an incredibly small budget.

The other half of the symbiotic relationship between cable access and the TV production student is the benefit to the student from participating in the cable access experience. It has been said that "public access is the American dream of the everyman contributing his personal views to the community of his peers."[6] Perhaps the most important part of involving our college students in access television is that such involvement provides them with a real audience for their work. The newscast, the sports show, the book review, the interview with the local businessman or city mayor--whatever the program might be--now there are people out there, not just the instructor, watching the program, evaluating its production values, discussing its content. The knowledge that a real live viewing audience will see the program (perhaps not a large audience, but an audience nonetheless) is a powerful stimulus to the student to do his or her very best and to work on communicative impact as opposed to a mere letter grade on a video project.

The "community of his peers" is a key concept of access television that relates directly to the second benefit to the college student. Many college students today seem to live in their own little worlds, active on campus but not off, involved with academics but not the surrounding community, aware of dorm regulations but not of local ordinances being discussed

and voted on in the city council up the street. Participation in public access television forces students to become part of the "public." The local origination programming may deal with campus events but is not restricted to them. Students serving as interns at an access station work side by side with townspeople, writing stories, shooting tape, conducting interviews. The students' perspectives on the community around them are broadened as diverse issues are explored ranging from political to social to moral to cultural. The production of a program for Community Cable 8 Television in DeKalb, Illinois by students and townspeople illustrates the point well. The topic was the local reading service for the blind and print-handicapped, a program designed to inform and convince viewers of the value of the service. Few students would have selected (or even known about) the topic for a standard video project in a basic TV course. Research, planning, and some useful connections, however, made the topic both viable and interesting to the college students who became associated with it. They learned a little about the community and its outreach services and personnel, while at the same time getting experience in television production.

The third advantage of having students involved in local cable productions is that they are confronted with very real deadlines. Unlike a graded class video project which, if turned in late, might still receive credit and a lowered grade, the

commitment made between student and access manager involves a specific date that the tape is due. A time and date are arranged, publicity is sent out, and an expectation that the tape will be done in time is usually made very clear. Such a timetable constraint serves as both a motivator and a harbinger of what the broadcasting graduate can expect in the "real world."

The fourth and final benefit to students who become involved in public access television is by no means the least. The student gets direct, hands-on experience with television production equipment, and such experience is what is needed today to prepare students for jobs in the competitive world of broadcast and cable television. The television production classes and labs offered on campuses across the country are the beginning of the training ground, but they are not enough. Extra experiences in television--of a realistic but essentially non-threatening nature--are needed. Local cable access channels can provide those experiences.

Case Studies in Public Access

The kinds of experiences available to the college student working at a small cable channel depend greatly upon the size of the college, the production facilities and goals of the communications department of the college, and the size and equipment inventory of the local cable company. A brief discussion of four colleges with student involvement in local

access programming will serve to illustrate the many ways in which that involvement can be beneficial.

The small college. Muskingum College is a small, liberal arts college located in New Concord, Ohio. Because the local cable TV system serves only about 600 subscribers, it is completely reliant upon the students of the college to produce the programming for its access channel, WMCO-TV-8. The twenty or so television production students at the school use the school's facilities to produce a local community news program once a week, which runs on the access channel for all subscribers to see. The small town of New Concord (pop. 1860), in effect, has a television production facility (the school's), while the students have an outlet for their work and a real audience to view it. Jeffrey D. Harman, Director of Broadcasting at Muskingum College, explains the merits of the system:

> The cable company and the college mutually benefit here; the system is so small that it is not cost effective for the cable company to utilize the channel on its own and the television program at Muskingum needs the access to give students a realistic production experience.[7]

Some small colleges handle the relationship between students and cable TV in a way entirely different from that of Muskingum College. A case in point is Shorter College in Rome, Georgia. Shorter is a liberal arts college with about 800 students and an on-campus television production lab of very modest proportions. That limitation, however, has

not stopped the resourceful communications faculty there from exploring and establishing a very successful laboratory experience at the local cable station. Professor Betty Zane Morris of Shorter College has several students each semester working as interns at Channel 10, "The Library Channel." A true local origination operation, Channel 10 has been a part of Rome's cable service since 1976. It is operated by a professional staff of video experts employed by the Sara Hightower Regional Library, which serves a combined population of over 112,000 in Northwest Georgia. Students gain college credit working alongside video professionals and community volunteers producing a full line-up of evening cable programming from 6:00 pm to 9:00 pm Monday through Friday.[8] The cable company provides high-quality broadcast equipment in their building across the street from "The Grease Pit," a converted gas station which houses the editing facilities and mobile unit of the library video department. The cooperation of the college, library, and cable company make the access dream a reality with professional results in Rome, Georgia.

The medium-size college. Larger state colleges frequently have sophisticated video equipment designed to train students in state-of-the-art production techniques. Television production students at West Georgia College in Carrollton, Georgia enjoy modern equipment and small class size in both the studio and field production courses. Lightweight ENG

cameras, 3/4" portapaks, time-base correctors, a special effects generator, and time code editing equipment enable students to produce programs of high technical quality. Each quarter students from broadcasting and journalism produce a one-hour newsmagazine called Campus Close-Up, brainchild of faculty member Sherry Alexander. The local cable company in Carrollton, 20-CATV, provides time free of charge on its access channel, Channel 13, and plays the tape from its head-end to the approximately 2000 cable subscribers. This situation provides an example of an access channel with absolutely no equipment serving only as an outlet for the students' programming. Students know they will have an audience watching their collective work, and strive all the harder to do a good job. The project is not merely another assignment for a course grade. When Channel 13 is not running Campus Close-Up it might be running other locally-produced programs done by Gemini Productions, a video production house specializing in local sports events. The majority of the time the channel carries the USA Network.

The large university. Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois is a school of over 20,000 in a community of about 33,000. Community Cable 8 is the local access channel that seeks to involve both townspeople and students in local program production. The television facilities at NIU are not unlike those of West Georgia College. The community of DeKalb,

however, through fundraisers, grants, and donations, has been able to put together a modest two-camera, color studio operation with lighting, a switcher, audio board, and VCR's. As a result, the cable access station serves as both an outlet for student and community programming and a production lab for students who want to go beyond the course work offered at the university. Advanced TV production students at NIU put on two live half-hour newscasts every evening, at 6 and 10, and feed the cable direct at the flip of a switch in master control. The advantage to the arrangement is that the cable experience cuts across majors, enabling journalism students with a course specialization in news writing, to actually work a camera or edit a story. The television production student is exposed to different equipment and appreciates the ability to transfer principles from one studio to another, thereby broadening his or her technical abilities. From book reviews to musical or sporting events to dramatic monologues by the DeKalb Arts Commission, the interface of TV production student with community cable access has been a worthwhile and successful experience in DeKalb, Illinois.

Problems and Challenges

The Sloan Commission on Cable Communications stated in 1971 that "public access channels, in short, are not likely to operate smoothly. But if they can help contribute in any

significant way to the solution of the general problems within their communities, the problems they themselves create will be more than tolerable."[9] The concern thirteen years ago was that cable access could not "cope with everyone shouting at once; there must be allotment of time, and a procedure for sharing out the most favorable times."[10] Today, that concern might seem like alarmism, not really justified except within the largest and most politically active metropolitan cable systems. The problem in 1984 is certainly not that too many people are trying to use their local access channel, but rather that too many people have come to perceive of cable TV as the deliverer of global programming: WGN, HBO, Showtime, WOR, Cinemax, WTBS. Too few people are concerned about access television. Few people care enough to write and produce local programs, and even fewer are inclined to watch them. How can we pump new vitality into public access TV? By treating college students as "public" and turning them loose (with appropriate guidance) as directors and producers of programs of interest more to the community than to their professors.

There is an important relationship between cable access television and the broadcasting student. That relationship may place the student into the role of an intern working several hours a week at the station. It may involve only the use of cable facilities to provide a local audience for student videotapes. But, regardless of the nature of the involvement,

there are very real benefits to both the student and the access channel.

Student video productions can be good and occasionally are great. Some highly entertaining and creative student projects are aired on the PBS program Image Union. A new weekly cable show entitled Videophiles is making its debut this fall, featuring only amateur video pieces between 15 seconds and 7 minutes, and awarding up to $1000 in prize monies for the very best each week. On a smaller, less ambitious scale, however, even the most mundane book review or local newscast--written, produced, and hosted by college students--can serve as programming material to fill the void on most access channels. The cablecaster gets free local programming. He merely pre-empts an old rerun of I Love Lucy. The city is happy because the cable company is doing some local origination programming as provided for in the franchise agreement. And, finally, the college student is getting exposure to television laboratory experiences which supplement (and sometimes even precede) his or her college TV courses. Such a cooperative arrangement is one that we, as cable managers, access station directors, and broadcast educators, should strive to nurture.

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[3]Earl Hines, interview held at West Georgia College, October 15, 1984.

[4]Gross, 1983, p. 62.

[5]Community Cable 8 Operations Booklet, 1982.

[6]"Local Origination," Video Systems, December, 1983, p. 27.

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